TV Talent - the good, the bad and the truly dreadful

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Julian Cribb, former science writer for *The Australian* newspaper, claimed that scientists had let Australia down because they have not told the people what they are doing:

"Scientists have been so wrapped up in their work and their discoveries, they have forgotten to explain them to the society that pays their miserable wages.

"They have omitted to put their work in language that ordinary people can understand. They have failed to explain its relevance to our daily lives - our health, wealth and well being as a nation - and how to put it into practice in our industries."

He was a great advocate of using the media as a tool in building support, a proposition that scientists sometimes find difficult. Scientists and journalists tend to eye each other suspiciously from great distances.

But some scientists have learned to use the media with great skill (and profit). They have learned to cope with the challenges, one of which is gaining accurate coverage for complex issues.

The media can be tricky, but favourable media coverage encourages a range of positive outcomes. It can create jobs, improve public health, increase funding for research programs, change policy, and satisfy public curiosity.

And as most of the funding for research in Australia is provided from the public purse, scientists have a duty of accountability to explain how public funds are being spent and what the benefits are.

The future for groups which depend on public funding and do not have community support is bleak.

Scientists make a major contribution to the wealth and health of society, but is this contribution properly recognised? Do people understand what scientists do? The industries they sustain? Do they accept the need for continuing funding of scientific research?

To help those just starting out, here are five tips for basic survival:

1. Get your message straight. Work out the two or three main points you want to get across, phrase them in simple non-technical language, and stick to these points. There is no time or space for complicated explanations.
2. Talk about the implications of your work, rather than the clever science. People want to know how they are going to be affected by your work. Is it going to mean cheaper bread? Will it expose some dangerous food-handling practices? Will it create a new export industry?
3. Learn about the world of the journalist. They live by ferocious deadlines, and are always in a hurry. They work in a highly competitive industry, and few understand even basic scientific facts. But they do try to get things right - the onus is on you to explain your work in clear and simple terms.
4. Prepare a single sheet of paper with the important details. This should set out the basic details of the story, spell everyone's names correctly, and have your phone contact points. And consult your collaborators and colleagues to make sure everyone agrees on the wording - it can head off territorial arguments before they start.
5. Understand the importance of pictures. Good pictures can make all the difference. A compelling photo can gain a story prominent newspaper coverage; and the rule is that without interesting pictures, there is no television story.

There is a lot scientists can do to make the media work to their advantage. Unless they learn to use the media to explain their work to the public, they cannot hope that the public will support them.

Lack of public support translates rapidly into loss of public funding, and the sidelining of what should be one of the driving forces of Australian life.

Television is the most powerful and the most demanding form of media. It's hardest to handle, and the most time-consuming to work, but the impact of television is greater than any other form.

When the crew first arrives, the camera-person will get busy collecting as many background and action shots as possible. You need to provide things for videoing.

Small furry animals and machines that go whiz and emits puffs of steam are best. Find scientific equipment, protective clothing, strange vehicles, baby animals anything that is photogenic and related to your work. Small demonstrations work well.

While the camera-person is collecting shots, you can use this time to chat to the reporter. Fill them in on the important aspects, the main thrust of story. Check through the story with them, and remember that everything you say - before, during and after the interview - is on record and can be used in the story

And you can also suggest shots to the camera-person.

The reporter will then want to talk to you, the "talent". The reporter has the main idea of the story and now needs one or two quotes from you. They're called "grabs" and

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range from 3 to 12 seconds in length. That's all the time you get on camera, so make the most of it.

What are the three main things you want to say? Write them down before the interview. During the interview keep coming back to those points. Any question can be answered: "Look, the most important thing about this is that..."

Short words and sentences, and comparisons with familiar processes or objects can be used to advantage (eg. "It works a bit like an egg-beater").

It is important to understand the format of a television news item. An average story runs for 1 minute 20 seconds, and contains 3 to 12 seconds of interview (the "grab") with the "talent". It will contain about 22 different shots (each time the camera cuts from one picture to another is a shot).

Remember that news audiences will not see or hear the question, only your answer. This means that you can employ a dictum perfected by a famous old politician from Queensland: "bugger the question, here is the answer I want to give."

One depressing point. You are going to be judged primarily according to the way you look, secondly to how you speak, and third - and a long way behind - to what you say. (Psychologists analysing television news put the figures at 55%, 38%, and 7%).

And finally, ten top tips for handling TV

1. Have a clear objective in mind for using the media
2. Use colloquial simple language. TV uses language that 12-year olds would understand
3. Prepare 3 key points that you want to get across in the interview
4. Give short, sharp answers
5. Don't look down the camera (you'll look shifty). Look at the journalist
6. Use simple, direct and colourful language - "pub speak"
7. Remember to stick to your main message - don't get distracted
8. If a fly lands on your face, then brush it away…and avoid any unnecessary distracting habits or dress on TV
9. Be enthusiastic about your work
10. Don't wear sunglasses on TV - you'll look like a crook.

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They have been running media skills training workshops for scientists in Australia for over five years.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

STEPHEN WARD (University of Western Sydney, Macarthur): I was wondering the last point about not wearing sunglasses, does that also apply to hats?

JENNI METCALFE: Hats are okay, but you might be asked to tilt them back so that they don't shade your face.

TOSS GASCOIGNE: Generally speaking, I think as scientists you should wear what you normally wear so don't go out in experimental sites dressed up in collar and tie and don't wear white coats unless you normally wear them. Be comfortable and be natural.

STEPHEN WARD: Once I completely forgot that I had TV people coming up one day and I had my normal field clothes on complete with huge holes around the knees and huge dirt all over them and everything else. It wasn't the most attractive unfortunately.

ELIZABETH SAKKER: I once had the embarrassing experience of having to be on television live and so I would love to have been able to have the time to dive off and then have a retake. I have really enjoyed the production you gave.

You began though by saying that the media are not going to change and that we need to be able to think about how it's going to be presented, or published. The thing that hasn't been covered today is the electronic media and Internet. There are a lot of things that can go into publication which are not vetted by anyone else, and that you totally control whether you put it in or you don't put it in, and it goes in almost instantaneously. I wondered if you would like to comment on that.

TOSS GASCOIGNE: I don't want to say anything particular about the internet, but I think if you're after a medium where you don't get, or you can avoid, the editorial hand the best way to go is live interviews on radio, the sort of thing that happens for about 8 hours every day on 2BL in Sydney and another 20 stations across Australia. My feeling about the internet is that it's still very much reaching a minority audience. The people that you really want to reach are the people who watch the Channel 9 News. They're the voters, the people who listen to the John Laws radio show. They're not the sort of people, generally speaking, who are going to be hooking into the World Wide Web.

NIALL BYRNE: I wouldn't mind adding a little bit to that. At Animal Health over the last couple of years we have made quite a lot of use of the Internet with calicivirus and other stories mainly as a journalistic resource, that has been its best use. For school students and also for journalists we have found that when there has been a story that has run internationally, US journalists in particular have often read our information sheets, even copies of scientific papers, off our web site before they start talking to us.

So the web is very helpful in that sense but it doesn't deliver to your audience in most cases unless you're trying to reach a particular group through an Internet mailing list. So you have still to be using the mass media and the reality is that, for CSIRO for example, we have to try and make sure that the electorate is prepared to support the continuing appropriation investment, the millions of dollars that we get.

I was going to make another comment on vision and trying to control TV news. Pictures are really important, as Jenni was saying, and if you have got good pictures - if you can afford to, if you have got two or three people working in an area or a number of stories, if you can afford to, get a good cameraman to come in advance. Prepare some standard shots, broadcast quality, and have it available for the media and then you can take the control of the story just a little further. You can start to influence the pictures. In many of those cases that's what was happening.

The last media tape we did we picked up on six projects in a day and it cost us about a thousand, so if they had had to pay for it, it would have cost each project a sixth of that. So it's not really expensive if you have something that you really want to say. It's not for everyone, but if you're setting up a strategy to do something, or if you're planning to do some television, then it's worth a few hundred dollars to set up beforehand to get good pictures.

ARTHUR WHITE (Royal Zoological Society): Just watching the grabs and short takes and so on that are occurring here, it seems like there's a real conflict for the person being interviewed. The conflict seems to be that there is the pressure to give a short, sharp answer but in most cases you're not really presenting the full story because ideally you would want to give a qualified answer if you were given that luxury, but that's not what the journalist is after. They're after, in many cases it appears, an oversimplified, completely unqualified answer.

JENNI METCALFE: I think that comes back to one of the differences between scientists and journalists. I like to refer to it as being the difference between lumpers and splitters. Journalists are lumpers and scientists are splitters, but if scientists want to be good TV talent in particular, they have to learn to be lumpers. I don't believe that it's necessarily a simplification or a compromise of your message. It's rather a distillation, that's the term I like to use.

KATHY DAVIS: I have found this very interesting mainly because I have never, in all the interviews I have done, taken control the way you're suggesting that the scientist should. I have always assumed that they're the professionals. They have come out. They want an interview. They will know what to do. I just have to do what they tell me to do and the message will go across. It's a very passive process. I have never thought of taking the control and deciding and almost ramming through what I think is the most important thing.

What I might think is the most important thing, and if I keep answering the questions to that effect, you may not get what you want as media people because it may not have any news value. I'm just not quite sure about this business of actually taking control to that extent but as news people who have interviewed people in this sort of situation, do you find it difficult when somebody actually takes control to this extent that you're suggesting?

TOSS GASCOIGNE: It can present problems. I guess we have uncovered the tip of the iceberg here. My answer to that would start with the fact that I think if scientists, generally speaking, are successfully going to take their story to the media, unless they have done a lot of it, and have a really good feel for it, it's a good idea for them to talk the work over with someone who is intelligent, but is not familiar, with their work and possibly not a scientist - someone like me, for instance. I have got an eye for the media but I'm not a scientist.

It's because what interests you as a scientist may not necessarily be of interest to the media. Scientists get excited about all sorts of things, which might be far too esoteric or difficult or compartmentalized, but not of interest to the media at all. When I was working for CSIRO I often felt that the stories, which got the most media coverage in our division, were relatively minor bits of science, but they did have a fascination for general audiences.

So I think that's a difficulty you face and your reservations about taking control of the interview are well founded, but if you're quite confident with your story, and if you have talked it over with media people first, and you do know the points that you want to get across, I think that it's quite legitimate for you to direct the interview in some ways. This is because, as Jenni said, typically the television interviewer is going to be young, inexperienced quite often, and is not going to have any scientific background, particularly if you're working in rural areas where typically TV journalists serve their apprenticeships. They possibly won't know anything about anything and they're entirely in your hands. You're the only person who has got any knowledge in that area.

So I think it's really up to you to make clear in your own mind the two or three things that you want to get across in the interview and make sure those points are made. There can be a little bit of skill in directing the interview in that way.

PAUL WILLIS: I was going to add that by the time that they have come out to interview you, that shouldn't be the first time that they have met you. Before they bring out the camera crew and are ready to interview you, they should know roughly what you're going to say, what you're going to put across, because you will have talked to them on the phone before they turn up and so it's largely to do with how you set the story up before they even arrive in your laboratory.

Don't be frightened to help orchestrate that. If you can make the job easier for the reporter, the reporter is going to respond that much more to your story. The less work we have to do - we're only human - the better.